



# Trimming the Force

*Guiding Airmen through the force shaping process is no easy task*

*by Staff Sgt. Matthew Bates, opening photo by Tech. Sgt. Larry Simmons*

*Basic trainees wait in line for lunch during their week-long field training exercise at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley said taking care of Airmen and making them a better-prepared force is one of the Air Force's three top priorities.*

The Air Force is having to deal with a lot of hot issues these days.

Recapitalization, modernization, long deployments and winning the war on terrorism are just some of them. But everything boils down to the Air Force having the people it needs to work these concerns.

That's why no issue burns with more intensity than force shaping. However, the Air Force needs to downsize. That means cutting more than 28,000 Airmen by 2009 — this after 25,000 officers and enlisted have already left the service since 2004, either voluntarily or involuntarily. In fiscal 2007 alone, the target is to reduce the force by 25,000 to achieve the end strength of 334,200.

The cuts impact the service as a whole. In every office on every base,

someone knows someone affected by force shaping initiatives.

Two Airmen who work in the force shaping branch at the Air Force Personnel Center at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, are familiar with the issue. It is their job to help Airmen transition out of the Air Force.

"We don't go through a stack of records and randomly choose people to separate," branch chief Maj. Lorraine Hodge said.

In fact, the force shaping branch has little to do with deciding which Airmen must involuntarily separate. A board typically made up of colonels, general officers and commanders makes that decision.

#### **Providing help**

What the branch does is provide board-eligible Airmen who must



separate the support, information and resources they need to help them through the process as much as possible.

This help includes conducting briefings on the force shaping program, maintaining a Web site (<http://ask.afpc.randolph.af.mil/forceshape>) dedicated to force shaping initiatives and answering hundreds of e-mails every week from people across the globe who are concerned their careers may soon end.

“These are people who don’t want to leave the Air Force,” deputy branch chief Maj. Ashley Heyen said. “It’s a big part of their life and so they are fighting to stay in.”

Because of this, branch members often find themselves emotionally involved.

“You try not to be, but it’s hard, especially when you listen to their stories and hear the disappointment and sadness in their voices,” Major Hodge said.

But not every case is heartbreaking. In some cases, Airmen volunteer to separate or are relieved to find out they can leave the Air Force early.

Ultimately, force shaping comes down to numbers. Personal desires have little impact on an Airman’s chances. The Air Force must reduce its force to meet recapitalization and modernization goals, personnel officials said.

First Lt. Matt Butler knows that all too well. A security forces officer, he was on the list of board-eligible officers for his career field. He faced having to leave the service early in 2006.

“It’s all about the needs of the Air Force,” he said.

Fortunately, the Air Force didn’t choose the lieutenant for involuntarily separation. But he still remembers opening the notification.

“It was such a simple letter,” he said. “But it was the sense of relief knowing the Air Force still wanted me.”

The branch is ready to help those who get the other kind of letter, the one letting them know they must separate. Perhaps the best help it offers is in the form of advice. On a regular basis, the force-shaping staff tells people to perform several vital actions.

“The most important thing Airmen who are being considered for involuntary separation can do is check their records and make sure they are correct,” Major Hodge said. “We simply can’t stress that enough.”

One common misconception is that Airmen only need to check their records at the local military personnel flight. This is not the case. The records the board receives and maintains inside the personnel center are separate, and are therefore often wrong or incomplete. So, the branch recommends Airmen check these records, too.

### Checking records

People can accomplish this in several ways. Airmen can take permissive temporary duty to Randolph and personally inspect their records. Or they can call the record section and conduct a scrub over the phone.

Airmen should also regularly check the force shaping Web site for updates, new information and regulations.

“We work hard to get information to Airmen,” Major Hodge said. “The Web site is one of our best tools to do this and it’s a great source for Airmen who may have questions about the force shaping program.”

Another message the branch tries to get out is that force shaping is not simply about reducing numbers. It’s also about balancing the force.

“Yes, the Air Force needs to involuntarily separate some Airmen,” said Lt. Col. James Standridge, deputy chief of the personnel center’s retirements and separations division. “But it has to make sure it separates the right ones.”

This means examining every Air Force Specialty Code, determining the ones with too few, or too many, Airmen and setting a target percentage of Airmen to add or cut from each job.

“Separating half the maintainers in the Air Force all at once would not be good,” the colonel said. “So making sure to obtain a representative sample from every job to place on these boards is important.”

### Quality Airmen

Frustrating as it may be for Airmen to find themselves facing involuntary separation, Majors Hodge and Heyen both stress Airmen should not feel discouraged or unwanted. Many react by thinking they weren’t good enough or the Air Force simply didn’t want them.

That is not the case, Major Hodge said.

“The fact is we’re forcing out some very good Airmen,” she said. “They aren’t being separated because they’re troublemakers or below-average performers. It’s simply because the Air Force has to cut some positions.”

In reality, force shaping would be much easier if there were a lot of low-quality Airmen to separate. But, for the most part, today’s Airmen are top notch performers, she said.

“After all, we are the best air and space force in the world,” she said.

Major Hodge said people should remember one thing. “This isn’t your grandfather’s or your father’s Air Force where you could sign up and do your 20 or 30 years,” she said. “You may do 20 or you may do six. But 20 years is not guaranteed anymore.”

As the cuts continue, young officers like Lieutenant Butler have to wait patiently. If the Air Force needs them, they will stay. If not, then they’ll have to go.

“I’m taking it one duty station at a time,” Lieutenant Butler said. 🦋

**Editor’s note:** The personnel center’s records section officer’s side is at DSN 665-2371, commercial at 210-565-2371. The enlisted’s side is at DSN 665-2353, commercial at 210-565-2353. Call customer service at DSN 665-2998, commercial at 210-565-2998 or by calling 1-800-210-565-1136.

**Lt. Col. Mike Kelly (left), 37th Training Group deputy commander, goes over staff packages with 1st Lt. Matt Butler. Lieutenant Butler survived force shaping last year and was able to stay in the Air Force. Fifty to 60 percent of all security forces lieutenants in the 2003 commissioning year group had to leave the service. The lieutenant works as the executive officer to Colonel Kelly. Second Lt. Emily Brand (center) files retention recommendation forms used to help assist in the force-shaping process. Lieutenant Brand is helping the force-shaping branch while waiting for a pilot training slot.**

by Staff Sgt. Brian Ferguson



by Tech Sgt. Larry Simmons



by Staff Sgt. Bryan Bouchard



**First Lt. Brooks Roland (left), a security forces officer, calls to fellow Airmen for support during a combat first aid obstacle course exercise at McGuire Air Force Base, N.J. During the 2006 force-shaping process, his career field was cut by about 60 percent, due to overmanning. Staff Sgt. Eric Flinders (above), a communications specialist, works on a network server. Over the next few years, force shaping will impact some enlisted communications AFSCs and other career fields across the Air Force. Airmen affected may be forced to cross-train or separate.**